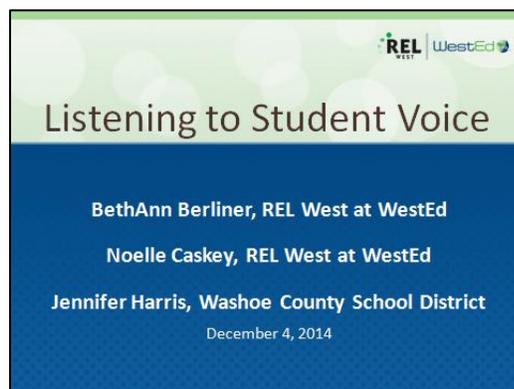


## TRANSCRIPT

## Listening to Student Voice

SPEAKERS	BethAnn Berliner, REL West at WestEd Noelle Caskey, REL West at WestEd Jennifer Harris, Washoe County School District
EVENT TITLE	Webinar: <i>Speak Out, Listen Up! Including Student Voice in School Improvement</i>
EVENT DATE	December 4, 2014



DAN WILSON

Welcome again to *Listening to Student Voice*. And with us today are BethAnn Berliner, the Senior Researcher and Project Director for REL West at WestEd; Noelle Caskey, our Senior Research Associate at WestEd; Jennifer Harris, the High School Graduation Initiative Program Evaluator at Washoe County School District in Nevada. And I will now hand control to BethAnn to talk about the student voice toolkit.

BETHANN BERLINER

Good morning, and I should also say, a good afternoon. I know we have some folks with us from as far away as Puerto Rico, and a crew from West Virginia, and I see people from Kentucky, and many from California, and all sorts of places in between. So, again, welcome, we are so glad you are with us. We're excited to talk with you about student voice, and to share what we've been learning about promising ways for educators to listen to what students are thinking, feeling, and saying about improving their school experiences and outcomes.

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The *Speak Out, Listen Up!* Toolkit

- Learn about how listening to student voice may strengthen school improvement efforts
- Hear firsthand how educators are using the tools
- See an example of student voice in action



So, I wanted to first frame what we’re going to be doing together this morning. We’re going to tell you about our new toolkit, *Speak Out, Listen Up!*, which is a set of tools for eliciting student ideas to strengthen local school improvement efforts. We’re going to hear first-hand accounts of using some student voice tools, with Jennifer, describing how one large urban district used a student-led digital storytelling process, and with Noelle describing her experiences in multiple districts using a fishbowl listening circle technique. We’re going to show you a student-made video that illustrates in a very powerful way what student voice looks like in action, as well as showing you a short clip of the fishbowl tool in progress. And, of course, we’re going to open things up for conversation to learn from one another. So, feel free to use the chat; so, feel free to type in questions, comments, examples from your school, all of which we will respond to.

Before we jump into discussion of the tools, we wanted to first talk a little bit about student voice more generally—what we’ve learned from research and practice, what it is, why listening can be beneficial, and what it looks like in practice.

What is Student Voice?



Listening to student voice is the practice of educators intentionally and systematically eliciting student viewpoints on a specific topic for improvement purposes

Students:

- Are asked what they think, feel, experience
- Take on new roles
- Are involved in decisions and actions
- Are viewed as partners

So, what exactly do we mean by student voice? To back into a definition, I want to start by first acknowledging that the work that we do is grounded in the premise that students, like all of us, want their voices to matter. They want their opinions to be heard, their ideas to be taken seriously, their experiences to be counted, and their feelings to be validated. Our work is also grounded in decades of research by key thought leaders, like Sizer and Noddings and Fullan among others, and documentation and experience that confirm that the voices of students are largely missing from our conversations that define and address the school challenges that we

confront. And we hope that by learning to listen—listen better, listen more often, and listen more intentionally to what students have to say—that we discover new ideas for dealing with some of our schools’ most difficult problems.

So, developing our toolkit, we looked around for various definitions of student voice, and they all seemed to converge around the notion that listening to student voice is the practice of educators and other adults in our schools intentionally and systematically eliciting student viewpoints on a specific topic for improvement purposes. So, let’s unpack that a little bit. The term *student voice* basically refers to students being asked, in a very serious way, what they think, feel, and experience about important issues—about curriculum, instruction, their course offerings, school policies and practices, even budget decisions and facility needs. The term refers to students taking on new school roles, such as planners, teachers, researchers, even advocates, helping to raise awareness or taking a stand on an issue. It refers to students being involved in making decisions and taking actions that address issues that impact their lives. And students are viewed as valued partners, bringing their assets and resources, and their concerns and interests, to school change efforts. So, in short, for us, students are consciously seen, heard, and part of the solution. That’s what this work is all about.

### Why Listen to Student Voices?

Listening can benefit **educators**...

- Engage students in taking some responsibility for change
- Bring fresh perspectives to issues and priorities
- Create a synergy of ideas
- Raise issues of equity and other difficult topics



Listening can benefit **students**...

- Provide developmental supports
- Develop skills

So it turns out that listening to student voice can be beneficial to both schools *and* to students. For example, we know that listening can engage students in taking some responsibility for, and buying into, school change efforts, sharing with adults the effort to make things better. We know that it can bring fresh perspectives, insight, creativity, energy to school issues and priorities, because students may view their school experiences very differently than we do as adults. Listening can create a synergy for improvement that transcends; it goes beyond what either students or educators could accomplish alone, in terms of solution ideas. And it can raise issues of equity and other difficult topics that may go unnoticed or misunderstood or even avoided by adults, and provide educators with greater access to information about marginalized or vulnerable student groups. We’re going to see that in the video in a little bit. Student voice efforts can also be beneficial to students by providing them with important developmental supports, such as adults conveying caring and high expectation messages, and offering students, especially our most disengaged and struggling students, with meaningful opportunities to participate in school. And it can help students develop confidence, and other skills and competencies.

What does Student Voice Look Like?

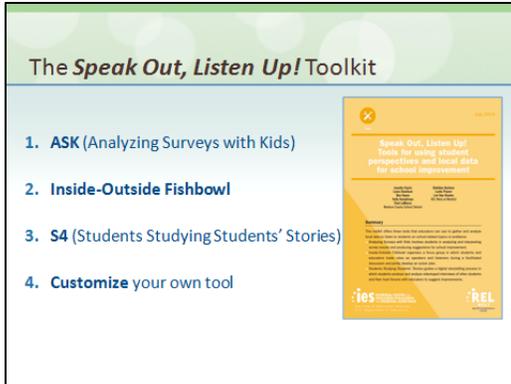


- One-time, one-way flow of information
- Students and educators working together over time to understand problems, rethink solutions, and take action

So in practice, listening to student voice can take many different forms. It looks like lots of different things in the real world of our schools. We'd love to hear from you about how your school or district listens to student voice. Please feel free to type away, to chime in to the chat box if you have some examples that you'd like to share with us. And while some of you share your approaches, we wanted to acknowledge that educators typically listen to student voice through a number of channels, such as student surveys, focus groups, panel presentations, and student leadership committees. I'm sure those kinds of examples sound very familiar to most of us, since most schools have some or all of these kinds of data collection opportunities in place. But when you think about it, in these examples, student voices are heard primarily one time, one way. So, they're one time, one way information sources on issues that we as adults consider important.

So, just by way of example, let's think about the questions that we ask students in surveys. Many schools have student surveys. We, as adults, generally write the questions so that we, as adults, can gather information about issues that are important to *us*, and students rarely have a say about the content and with how the information is used, if ever, to impact their lives. Of course, in some contexts, these kinds of approaches might be all that your school needs, given what you want to learn, or because of very real time or other resource constraints. With that said, the field is moving forward and learning that listening to student voice can become much more powerful and much more consequential for making school improvements when it involves educators and students collaborating to define and address school problems. Where information for rethinking solutions flows in both directions, charting a way forward. So, this can involve all sorts of things, like jointly—and, of course, that's the key word there, *jointly*—asking fresh questions, developing new or new kinds of data collection tools, collecting data, interpreting and making sense of new information together, and recommending and taking actions.

So in these instances, students are not a passive, one-way information source, but they're active participants, and they're partners with the adults in their schools. The idea here is that information flows back and forth in two ways—students to adults; adults to students—working together synergistically on priority issues of mutual concern. And that's the foundation of the toolkit that we developed.



So the toolkit—you can see on the right-hand side of your slide; that’s the cover sheet there. It’s super easy to use, it’s free, and at the end of the webinar we’ll tell you how you can download it for yourself and for colleagues if you’re interested. It was developed in partnership with a group of very talented educators and students in the Washoe County School District; that’s in metro Reno, Nevada. And this group was very interested in having tools at their ready, that by design bring educators and students together in authentic and meaningful—not in tokenized—ways to tackle some of their high-priority problems. In just a few minutes, you are going to hear about, and see how these tools are being used in schools.

But first, I wanted to just briefly describe the tools themselves, each of which was designed to use local data to address a range of local priorities. The example that we’re going to show in a little bit is wrangling with dropout prevention issues. But the tools are purposely structured so that they could address many of your local issues.

So, the three tools in the toolkit are ASK, Inside-Outside Fishbowl, and S4. Briefly, ASK is a tool that involves students in the analysis and interpretation of survey or other kinds of existing descriptive data, things like rates of chronic absenteeism, or dropout rate, or the number and type of disciplinary referrals. This tool teaches students how to summarize tabulated and graphically displayed data, and to convert these data into very simple—I’m talking bite-sized narrative statements—for students to wrangle with. Things like...depending, of course, on what your data show—but things like, boys have higher dropout rates than girls, or more students are suspended at school number 1 than at school number 2. Or the K-5 students in the afterschool program feel less bullied at school than those who don’t participate. Then through facilitated activities that are outlined in the toolkit, students learn to interpret those data from their viewpoints, generating plausible explanations and making recommendations for improvement.

So, just by way of a quick example here of how this works: In one district, the trustees brought together a pair of students from each of the high schools to look at what was their concern at the moment: college remediation rate data. And they asked the students to make sense of it, focusing on one question: Why they thought so many graduates were not well prepared for college? And, after using the process laid out in the tool, the students explained it, from their vantage, that there were too few real college prep courses available to them, and there was a need for more and better support for mastering the advance coursework that was being offered. The point is—the takeaway here is—that through using the tool, their perspectives

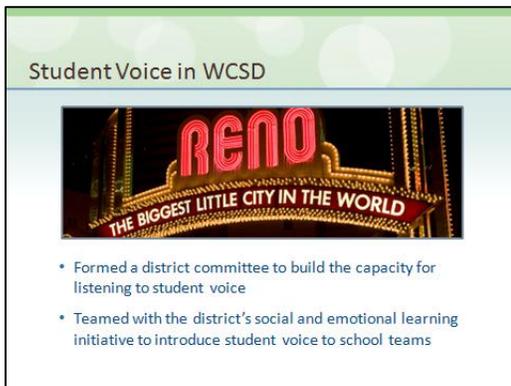
generated some reasonable explanations, and some actionable solution ideas, in a productive process. So, that's ASK.

The fishbowl is a tool that expands upon a conventional focus group. But in this incidence, if you can sort of imagine it in your mind's eye, students and educators swap roles as speakers and listeners in inner and outer circles while discussing a school issue in a very structured format that Noelle will describe in just a bit. And then as part of the process, they jointly develop a plan of action to address the issue.

The third tool is a digital storytelling process that Jennifer is going to describe in depth, where students conduct, develop, and produce videoed student interviews about a high-stakes issue. And they host forums with school and district staff, using the video as a learning tool for discussing what students say and experience and need for making their schools better places. We also included a blank tool template; you could see that number 4 on the slide there. It's our experience that once folks start using student voice tools, they start playing around with them, customizing approaches to match their grade level or their student population or their school. They also start to create new spinoff tools, and so we simply provided a template to document and organize these new ideas.

The last thing I want to say about the toolkit is that you'll find detailed step-by-step directions for how to plan to use each of the tools, including a checklist of all the materials that you'll need, how to use each tool to collect data on student perspective, and, most importantly, there's a lot of tips on how to do something to take action based upon the results from using the tools.

So, now I'm going to turn to Jennifer and to the students themselves, through their video, to share with us what student voice looks like in a district that really believes that when students speak out, and the adults listen, they can improve schools and support a student's success.



JENNIFER HARRIS

Good day, everyone. I would like to start by telling you a bit about my school district to provide some context. So, Washoe County School District is a large urban district that serves the metro Reno-Sparks areas, and also includes several nearby rural high desert communities. A large number of our students are poor, come from highly mobile families, and experience

barriers to education. Our district employees are very committed to knowing each of our 63,000 students and supporting their success in school. In fact, our motto is, “Every child by name and face to graduation.” So, we are using the toolkit as a professional development tool to grow the capacity of educators to use student voice in our work. We also formed a committee to institutionalize student voice districtwide, so that student voice really becomes a natural element in our practices. The student voice committee teamed with the Social and Emotional Learning Initiative—the SEL Initiative—to promote student voice as a vehicle for fostering SEL competencies. Competencies like empathy and self-awareness, for example. And together with the SEL district team, we are presenting the toolkit to elementary, middle, and high school teams in a series of training events this year.

**Students Studying Students’ Stories (S4)**



**Students as storytellers**

- Stories of persistence in WCSD

**Purpose**

- Increase awareness of obstacles some students face
- Explore what might lead to persistence
- Provide suggestions about how to prevent disengagement and support persistence

Now, I’d like to do a deep dive—although if you see the picture in the slide, it portrays more of a shallow dive—into a tool that I used to help evaluate a program aimed at reengaging dropouts. The questions I wanted to better understand were: What helps students to not give up and graduate, and what can schools do to support persistence? I approached student leaders at our alternative high school to see if they wanted to partner in a semester-long effort to explore the answers to these questions. The students in the leadership class were persisters themselves, and because they were persisters, they were the perfect group to help me explore my questions. I would like to mention that these are not typical leadership students that come to mind. These are not valedictorians, cheerleaders, or quarterbacks. These are students who have either dropped out of school at some point or who have struggled in one way or another at being successful in school. I also elicited the help of the teacher of the leadership class and the blended learning implementation specialist to co-facilitate the project. Together we used the S4 tool that BethAnn just described as part of the toolkit, and we followed the steps in the toolkit. First, exploring with students the issue of dropping out by examining research on the subject and engaging them in deep and often very personal discussion about their own experiences. Second, drafting questions they thought would elicit the information that we needed to learn about persistence. And third, teaching them to conduct interviews and produce a digital story. The students interviewed in the video were selected based on our definition of persisters; that is, students who were at risk of dropping out, or who had dropped out but returned to school and were enrolled at the time of the interviews. So, these were students who came back to school and were actively enrolled and attending class.

The leadership students conducted the interviews on video and created a digital story by reducing two-and-a-half hours of footage into a 15-minute piece. When that was completed, we took the video on the road to show it to school counselors, principals, and district leaders, and at most of these professional development forums, the students participated as co-facilitators.

Watch the Video and Consider



1. What **issues** at your school or district can benefit from listening to student voice?
2. What did you **learn** from the students that you might not have learned from other adults?
3. What **actions** can a school or district take to address the issues the students described?
4. How can you **facilitate** student voices being heard at your school or district?

In a moment, we're going to show you the video that the students created using the S4 tool. We are showing the video because we believe it is a good example of what students can create when given the opportunity to bring voice to issues that are important to them.

As you watch the video, we are asking you to think about the issues at your school or district that are important to students. We are also asking you to listen to key messages shared by the students in the video that might not be learned from adults. Also, try to imagine how a school or district can act upon the information shared by the students. And, finally, we are asking you to envision how you might support student voice in your organization. We will be asking for your responses after the video ends, and I'll refer back to these questions.

We do not have permission to share the video on our website.

Please contact  
**Jennifer Harris**  
Washoe County School District  
[jharris@washoeschools.net](mailto:jharris@washoeschools.net)

if you are interested in obtaining the video and permission to use it.

The District's Takeaways...

What we learned about dropout and persistence:

- Students left school because...
- Students persisted because...



We have some takeaways from the video in doing this project. First...well, we learned quite a bit about our students, our persisters. First, the student stories confirmed what we already knew; that the reasons for dropping out are varied, and often very complex. We heard that they dropped out because they felt teachers didn't care about them or understand their personal lives. Their individual learning needs were not being met. They fell behind in school and couldn't catch up. They had mental health challenges that weren't addressed, or they were bullied, or they experienced a crisis and didn't have the supports to stay on track. I'm sure that those themes you might find amongst some of the young people who might be leaving your school or district. Their stories also challenged some of our preconceptions about who these students are as individuals. As you could see, they are articulate, they are smart, and they take great pride in being students and being in school. We also heard they persisted because they had caring teachers, caring coaches, and others in their lives who believed in them. They want to be happy. Lastly, the persisters in the video had several ideas for supporting students. They asked for teachers to show that they care about them. They want instruction to match their learning needs. They want and need mental health supports, second chances to make up credits, and help to keep them safe from bullies and gang members.

Giving Voice – The Student Experience

- Personal stories mattered
- Adults cared about them
- Part of the solution, not part of the problem
- Gained confidence – they have something to say that others value



We invited several of the students who were involved in the making of the video to join us today. The bad news is that none of them could make it. But the good news is that none of them could make it because they are all busy with school and work. So, that's really good news. Fortunately, we built in reflection time throughout the project so that we could learn how the students perceived the experience as they were going through it. I also recently

followed up with several of the students to hear their thoughts of the project, now that they have had the benefit of hindsight.

Several common themes emerged from the student reflections. Many of the students said they had never participated in something so meaningful or had ever been asked to share their stories. Most of the students didn't know what we were asking them to do at the beginning of the S4 project. It wasn't until they began interviewing students and experienced the power of stories first hand that they realized the importance of the project. Other students said that being asked to share their experiences told them that adults in the district care about them, and that their insight is valued. So, the simple act of asking students to give their voice gave them the message that they were important, that they *are* important, they are valued, and they do have things that we want to hear and learn from.

The students were eager to contribute to the solution and they were able to see that they can make a difference in their school communities by building awareness about students who leave school and return. For many of the interviewees, the experience was scary, and they felt like they were exposing themselves to the world. But they chose to share anyways, because they felt others could benefit from hearing their stories. Students in the class connected with each other differently as a result of participating, in part because of the trust they developed for one another over the course of the semester, but also because of having the shared experience of bringing light to a topic that was close to them. For some, this seemed to strengthen the confidence they had in themselves to express opinions and, really, to self-advocate.

**What We Learned**

**Using the S4 tool and the toolkit:**

- Planning, planning, and more planning
- Buy-in at every level is necessary: district, school, classroom
- The tools are more geared for the secondary level and need to be modified for the elementary level
- It's rewarding for students and adults!



There are also several lessons we learned about facilitating and advocating for student voice in my district that I would like to share with you. First, in using the *Speak Out, Listen Up!* toolkit, we learned that planning is essential. Part One of each tool in the toolkit is dedicated to detailed planning, and it is so important not to skip any of the steps in the section, really so that obstacles can be avoided. For example, in our planning of the S4 project, we found out what consent forms had to be completed by students and parents prior to starting the project. This might seem like a simple task, and maybe something that you don't have to do ahead of time. But there are quite a few consent forms that you need to secure, and it does take some time to go ahead and get those consent forms signed. So, consent for participation in the project, consent for transportation to and from the interviews and different schools, consent to be recorded, and so on.

The second lesson we learned is that it is important to make sure there is a shared understanding of what is meant by student voice amongst staff in all segments of the organization, including administration, school, and classroom staff. This really helps build the capacity to support student voice across systems, and it ensures greater support for student voice more generally.

The third point refers to the need for more examples of student voice at the elementary grade level. As we introduce the toolkit to educators in my district, we are hearing that there is some uncertainty about how to support student voice of very young students. Right now we are looking to address this need by creating demonstration videos that show how to adapt existing tools to be applied to early grades, and then also model approaches to facilitating student voice with young students.

Finally, we expected participation in student voice experiences to be rewarding. Almost every case study out there includes testimony that speaks to the rewarding aspects of student voice. But it really didn't hit home for me until I personally facilitated the S4 project that led to the creation of the video. Working with the students on that project was the most gratifying professional experience I've ever had; and I can't stress that enough. And I often hear from other facilitators of student voice that their experiences with student voice is equally gratifying to them as well. Is there a question up there?

DAN WILSON

Yes, we do. Has the district acted on this information? Have there been any changes in policy or programs that are being considered as a result of hearing from the students?

JENNIFER HARRIS

One change...well, the most immediate change was just the building of the awareness of dropping out and persistence. And that itself has led to, I would say, often very deep and meaningful conversations within school teams, at schools, on how to support students who return to their school after having been dropped out. So, there is more strategizing going on around, number one, how to prevent students leaving in the first place, but definitely more attention on how to support those students who come back to us after having been dropped out. One of the great things about our school district is that we are...we are dedicated to supporting personalized approaches to learning, and this is a part of that. So, this is stressing building those social and emotional learning competencies to help build and foster resiliency. I could go on and on and on, but yes...I mean, there are many things that we are doing, but it all centers around support for students and individualized approaches to meeting student needs. So, I hope that addresses your question.

DAN WILSON

Actually, we do have one more question here; just came in. Were students trained on how to advocate their concerns with district and school administration?

JENNIFER HARRIS

They weren't specifically trained to take this information to administration; the project itself...the plan was that this video would be their voice, but this project didn't end with the creation of the video. It won't ever end, if that makes sense. So, we are continuing to work with students, especially within that leadership class who—of course, it's a new group of students—to have those skills to self-advocate at a personal level, but also for bigger issues that are important to them. So, in the individual projects or student voice experiences, that is sometimes a part of the planning, that that might be an objective, that we might take an artifact of our student voice project directly to administration, and it is the students who present those artifacts. So, in my example, it was mostly the students who presented the video. So, in that exercise, they are practicing and using their skills of advocacy. But it can be intentionally built into any student voice experience.

Okay, so with that, I'm going to pass the discussion over to Noelle Caskey, who is going to share with us her insight about the fishbowl strategy to elicit the student voice. Okay, thank you so much, and with that I'm passing over to Noelle.

What are Fishbowls?

- Students, in an inner circle, conducting a facilitated conversation with each other
- Adults listening to student conversation in an outside circle without interrupting or responding to students in the circle
- Followed by a debrief of the experience, and exploration of themes that emerged



NOELLE CASKEY

Thank you, Jennifer, and I just want to say welcome to everybody, and how nice it is that you are able to join us today. So, we're glad to have you. So, what I'm going to be talking about now is another tool from the toolkit, the Inside-Outside Fishbowl, which is sometimes also referred to as a student listening circle. And I suspect all of you are familiar with fishbowls, so I'll just give a kind of a brief review of what's involved. The way these particular types of fishbowls work, we have students in an inner circle conducting a facilitated conversation, and the adults who are outside the circle listen without interrupting or responding. And then after that, there is a debrief where everybody talks about what emerged from the student concerns.

**What is their Purpose?**



- Eliciting student perspectives in a safe space, i.e., without fear of criticism or interruption
- Providing adults in the school community with an opportunity to hear students “tell it like it is”
- Creating an opportunity for students and adults to have a deep dialogue about issues concerning the school

So, one of the reasons to do this is to give students an opportunity to share their concerns without fear of criticism or interruption. I think we are all probably very familiar with the experience of having a kid start to say something, and then somebody will just, like, assume that they know what’s going to be said next, and then give an answer or give a direction without ever letting the student finish a sentence. I’m sure I’m not the only one in this group who has done that on occasion. And one of the benefits, then, of having students be able to talk without interruption is that the adults in the school really get an opportunity to hear what students think. Finally, it really creates an opportunity for students and adults to really discuss deeply issues that concern the school. This is real time, and real things happen as a result.

**Why They Are Useful**

In school climate work:

- Bring to the surface differences between student and adult perspectives on school experience
- Can be an eye-opening experience for adults
- Lead to improvement action steps that students and adults have developed together



So, a couple of reasons...we use this particularly in school climate work, and it’s especially helpful in surfacing information about feelings of connectedness to schools, because often adults in the school will assume that the kids feels very “rah rah” about it, and then when they actually listen in one of these circles, they discover that the student perspective is very, very different. So, it can very eye-opening. And also, with the debrief and the post-listening activities, adults and students can work together to develop some real changes that affect how life is for kids. And a lot of times we...when we’re making decisions, we don’t consult the people who are most affected by it. I have been doing student listening circles for almost 20 years. And invariably the kids come up with some really good, practical ideas about how to improve student climate. Without that key piece, you are less likely to develop things that kids will really be willing to invest in.

Steps for Successful Implementation...



- Development and wording of questions for students
- Student preparation time with facilitator
- Agreements for both students and adults
- Adequate time for debrief and post-session planning

So, how do you make it work? Well, there are a number of key components. First of all, what kind of questions you ask the students to respond to—and we’ll be going over each of these components in a moment. And, then, students need to have prep time working with the facilitator, and we’ll actually show you a live segment of somebody doing that. And, then, there need to be agreements for both students and adults about how to behave while the circle is going on, and I’ll show those to you also. And, then, finally, it’s really important that you take time immediately after the fishbowl to have people talk about what they heard, and then to move right into a planning process.

Ideas for Developing Questions

- Construct open-ended questions and avoid questions with yes-no answers
- Make sure questions center on issues important to students
- Limit the number of questions to six or fewer; all students will respond to each question



So, *Developing questions*—I’m sure you can all imagine what would happen if you say to a kid, “Do you like school?” “No.” It doesn’t give you very much information about what it is that’s important to students about school. So, you also want to be sure that you’re asking about stuff that’s important to students, and not the, “Who gets the best spot in the parking lot?” or things that are, you know, beyond their control. And then, you have a limited number of questions. Ideally, a student listening circle has 12 or fewer students. If you have more than that, it gets kind of unmanageable. And when you are choosing students to participate, you do want to make sure you have a diversity of perspectives. So, sometimes people will set it up so that all the students in the leadership class are doing the circle. And that means that really important segments of the class— of the school—are not being heard from. Limiting the number of students, and also limiting the number of questions, means that we can actually hear all of it.

**Ideas for Preparing Students**

- Have each student write an answer to questions on note cards or paper, with separate card/paper for each question
- As they finish recording their answers to each question, the facilitator has them take turns reading their answers aloud
- If necessary, students are given the chance to revise their answers
- Repeat the process until all questions are addressed
- The facilitator discourages students from negative attacks on staff or administrators, and models reframing negatives as positive statements
- Facilitator and students agree on the order of the circle, and determine who will be the first person to respond to each question

*Preparing students*—what we do is have the students write their answers on note cards or on a piece of paper, with a separate card or paper for each question. The reason we have them do this in advance is so that they don't suddenly spark off of what other people are saying when they actually are conducting themselves in the circle. So, they have their cards to refer to what they've already answered. It helps people not freeze when it's suddenly their turn to talk. And after they answer each question, the facilitator has them take turns reading their answers out loud, and if necessary, students are given the chance to revise their answers. This goes on until all the questions that will be coming up in the circle have been addressed. The facilitator in particular discourages students from negative attacks on staff or administrators and models reframing negatives as positive statements. And then there's a *plan of action*—that students will agree on the order and who will answer each question first. So, let's look at a video showing prep.



**Video Narrator:** For many students, speaking out freely, especially in front of adults, may be a new and somewhat scary experience. The key goal of the student practice is to coach the students and give them practice in speaking out, so that they will be more comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions during the listening circle. Students are given the opportunity to answer the questions on their cards. The facilitator then reviews each question with each student and helps them reframe their responses as needed.

**Facilitator:** So, Chris, how do you know when an adult at school cares about you or believes in you?

**Chris:** Well, how you know if, when like, an adult or staff member cares about you is when you say “Hi,” they actually take the time to ask you how your day is, and they try to have a conversation with you, and they take a few of their minutes and to just listen to you without, like, trying to rush away.

**Facilitator:** So, you like it when they take special time to have a conversation with you separate from the classroom, or maybe in the hallway or something? Okay, great; thank you. Okay, Regina?

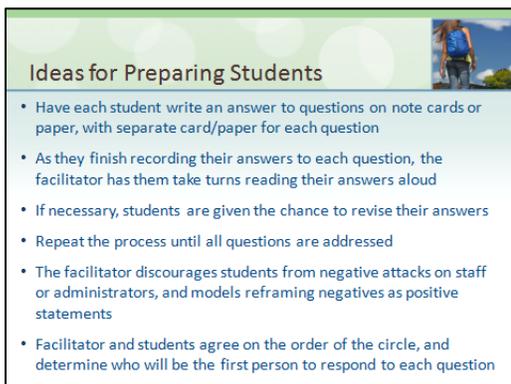
**Regina:** Well, when they try their best to help you bring your grades up. They don’t just give up on you and say, “Oh, well, just fail,” like Mr. James does. They also try and push you to succeed. An example is when they give you extra tutoring or extra credit to help you bring your grades up.

**Facilitator:** Very good. So, it sounds like you really care when they give you extra help with academics, right? So, we heard that Chris really likes when they talk to him outside of class, but you really like that extra academic help. So, remember how at the beginning, though, we talked about not using names, unless it was for a positive thing? Yeah. So I noticed you used Mr. James’s name. But it wasn’t really a compliment. So, can we try again?

**Regina:** Sure. I know teachers care about me when they try their best to help you bring your grades up. And they don’t just give up on you and say, “Oh, well, just fail,” like some teachers do. They also try and push you to succeed, like when they give you extra tutoring or extra credit to help you bring your grades up.

**Facilitator:** Okay, Regina; that’ll be perfect. So, make sure to write yourself a note, right, so that you try not to mention any names, and say it just like you did; that’ll be great. Thanks.

**Video Narrator:** The facilitator continues to work with each student and provides feedback to draw out specific suggestions. The process of reviewing each response for each student is repeated until all questions are completed.



**Ideas for Preparing Students**

- Have each student write an answer to questions on note cards or paper, with separate card/paper for each question
- As they finish recording their answers to each question, the facilitator has them take turns reading their answers aloud
- If necessary, students are given the chance to revise their answers
- Repeat the process until all questions are addressed
- The facilitator discourages students from negative attacks on staff or administrators, and models reframing negatives as positive statements
- Facilitator and students agree on the order of the circle, and determine who will be the first person to respond to each question

DAN WILSON

We have a question/request in the chat window before we continue. Please help us identify strategies, other than suspension, for students with behavioral problems. It seems like many

students only respond to at-home suspensions, so intervention results in students falling further behind.

NOELLE CASKEY

That is a very important question and a very serious issue. One of the things that we're seeing schools do in their climate work is to adopt what's called *positive behavior incentives*, so that students are rewarded for doing well and treating other people correctly. One program I've heard a lot about is called *Restorative Justice*, and in that program, students who have done something harmful to somebody else are expected to make reparations. I think if this is a subject of interest to you, there is a lot out there. I would Google *positive behavior interventions* and just see what you get, because there's quite a bit. And I think some of it really works. I know one school that I worked with reduced their suspension rate from something like, you know, 67% to something close to 20% by using one of these positive programs. So, keep that in mind.

And then getting back to the student listening circle, while the facilitator is prepping the students, the adults who are going to be listening to the students, who have also been carefully selected as people who feel positively about kids, can do something else, like, maybe review some relevant data. If there's a school's climate survey, they might look at the results of that. They might look at the trends in their discipline data; just kind of get themselves oriented to thinking seriously about school climate. And you noticed in the video that Megan, who was the facilitator, was doing a good job of helping students reframe questions in a more positive way...rather their answers, in a positive way. But you also probably noticed that they were addressing with a substantive question: How do you know when an adult at this school cares about you? Other questions that you might want to ask are: What do you think is most needed to improve school climate? And it might even be interesting at some point to have students help you come up with the questions.

**Suggested Agreements**

- Students and adults have similar agreements, to listen actively, turn off all devices and so on
- Adults have one additional agreement, which is to remain present for the entire session

**STUDENT LISTENING CIRCLE AGREEMENTS**

Students agree to:

- Turn off all phones and other distractions. No phone calls, emails, or texts.
- Focus on what you're listening to, and not think.
- When talking to specific people, only say what you have to say.
- Be respectful of each other.
- Be mindful of time.
- Speak one at a time.
- Speak your truth!

**ADULT LISTENING CIRCLE AGREEMENTS**

Adults agree to:

- Turn off all phones and other distractions. No phone calls, texts, or emails.
- Stay for the entire Listening Circle.
- Be silent during the Listening Circle.
- Control the pace of a circle: their reflections are powerful and profound.
- Take statements, reflections, questions, and responses when hearing and to each person in a non-judgmental way.
- Attend approximately Listening Circle monthly or bi-monthly, unless a pre-arranged, structured follow-up session.

So, finally, let's see if we can talk about the agreements. So these are the things that students agree to, and I think the pictures are a little slow. But everybody has to turn off all their things that ring or beep. Students have to focus on what they *do* like, and be positive, as we saw; respectfulness; respect, mindful of time; and then, tell the truth. And there's another agreement that adults have, which is to agree to stay for the entire listening circle. I worked in a school once where the principal got up and left just before the students were supposed to

speak. And they really, really wanted him to hear what they were about to say. So, we ended up delaying that piece of the program until he was free, and that took about an hour and a half. So, if you're having administrators—which I think is very important—to join the circle, make sure that they are not going to be called out while it's going on to deal with some kind of emergency.

**Debrief**

- Adults describe what it felt like to listen
- Students describe what it felt like to be listened to
- Students and adults work together in small mixed groups to describe themes that came up
- Students and adults work together in small mixed groups to develop action steps that the school commits to carrying out



And, finally, the debrief, which is really, really important. As we do in the student listening circles, first of all, we ask the adults what it felt like to listen. And very often, this is the first time they realize how little they do actually listen during the course of a regular day. So, having a chance to actually hear students all the way to the end of what they have to say is a new experience. And then the students describe what it felt like to be listened to. And this is something that is hugely important to them. It's often the first time they have been able to really put something out, and it just means a lot to think that the adults are being silent and listening to them.

So, what happens next is that the students and adults work together in small mixed groups, and often we do this with two recorders—a student recorder and an adult recorder. And each of the small groups comes up with their ideas about the themes that emerged. So, for example, one of them might be that there aren't enough yard supervisors during lunch and recess and other breaks. Another thing that might come up is that classes are boring. I know this is shocking to all of us, but it does happen. And then after they have listed all the themes, they get together and commit to some action steps. And it's really important that these action steps are followed up, because there will be some really good ideas. And it also shows the students that they are respected, and that they are being taken seriously.

DAN WILSON

We have a question, Noelle. I'm not clear on why students need to stay on a positive note. I understand saying *constructive*, but not...but doesn't asking them to be positive only result in limited information we could get from them?

NOELLE CASKEY

That is a really good question, and thank you to Ginny for bringing that up. Part of the reason we ask students to stay positive is that it can be very hard for adults to hear what students

have to say. And in one school, some of the administrators were actually in tears when the student discussion was over, because that was when they realized for the first time that they thought things were great, and the students totally disagreed with them. So, I know many of us as teachers use positive reinforcement as a teaching tool. And for a lot of people that works way better than negative reinforcement. So, partly we asked students to stay on a positive note so that the adults will be able to respond supportively to what they're saying instead of responding defensively. And, Ginny, I hope that answers your question. Are there any other questions that people would like to bring up or discuss on student listening circles? As Ginny did, you are all invited to contribute to the chat.

**We'd Love to Hear From You!**

- What did you learn?
- How might you use student voice or the toolkit?
- Do you have an experience to share?
- Other questions or comments?



Here are some questions you might think about responding to: what you learned, how you might use the student listening circle or the toolkit. Some of you may have an experience that you'd like to share; any other questions or comments. We'll give you a couple of minutes, and then I think we'll go on and wrap up the program.

OK, the chat is still open, but I'm going to move on, and turn things back over to Dan. And here is more contact information about how to reach each of the presenters, and the toolkit that is available online.

**Thanks, and for More Information, Contact:**

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The toolkit is available at <http://relwest.wested.org/resources/31>

